

## The Use of *shōmyō* in Shingon Ritual

The use of *shōmyō* in Shingon ritual is varied and multi-valent.<sup>1</sup> It is used as a praise offering. It also functions as one of the *sanmitsu*, the ritually prescribed activities for the body, voice and mind. Each of the *sanmitsu* can be performed singularly during the course of a ritual; however, they are always conceived of as a unit. Indeed, it is the complete performance of the *sanmitsu* that lies at the core of the transformative intent of Shingon ritual. Furthermore, the musical structure and textual content of *shōmyō* serve to link the practitioner, with all of his or her hopes, desires, aspirations, and fears to the wider, all-encompassing world of the *maṇḍala*. *Shōmyō*, therefore, cannot be considered in isolation from either the ritual activities with which it is joined, or the broader nature of the *maṇḍala* to which it leads. The ensuing complexity, while desired in Shingon thought, nevertheless poses problems of interpretation.

At the beginning of *shōmyō* lessons at Kōyasan University, the teacher and the students together recite the *Shōmyō ryaku ju mon*, a short, succinct guide to the practice and meaning of *shōmyō*. It was written by the Shingon monk Jakunyo in 1854.<sup>2</sup> His student, Jakushō (1833–1913), wrote a commentary in 1908 (alternative date: 1909; published 1910) to this guide, entitled the *Shōmyō tai i ryaku ju mon ge*. It, while in itself not an easily approachable text, expands upon the concise meanings expressed in Jakunyo's work. My M.A. thesis in ethnomusicology (1993) was based on fieldwork (at Kōyasan and at Saifuku-ji in Kagoshima) and did not attempt to give a complete reading of these two works. However, an examination of a few passages from Jakushō's commentary did serve to elucidate incisively the relationships between musical theory, ritual practice, and the soteriological goals of Shingon.

The five modes, and the five essential notes (of the twelve degree scale) which constitute the pentatonic scale that forms the basis of *shōmyō* melodies, correspond to the five Buddhas used in Shingon *maṇḍala*. While theory and practice have diverged, the significant aspect of this association is the rationale given for it. The manner in which the five Buddhas are linked to the five modes and five notes is a move which “emplots” the musical structure of *shōmyō* on the ontic plane. This correlation between the five notes and the five Buddhas is stressed in the *Shōmyō tai i ryaku ju mon ge*. Jakushō,

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion is restricted to the *shōmyō* of the *kōgi* school of Shingon.

<sup>2</sup> Jakunyo, and his student Jakushō, held positions in the *shōmyō go kechi myaku* (lit. the blood relationships in the *shōmyō* profession), an unbroken line of teacher-student relationships originating with Dainichi Nyorai and continuing until this day. Priests in this lineage are considered the primary teachers of *shōmyō* and are responsible for the correct transmission of the *shōmyō* tradition. I had the good fortune while at Kōyasan to study with a member of this lineage of teachers, Miyajima Kigyō, who was a student of the renowned *shōmyō* scholar and singer, Nakagawa Zenkyō.

while noting that the five modes and five notes comprise the substance of the music of society (i.e. non-religious music), believes they have, nevertheless, a profound significance for Shingon. Specifically, Jakushō links the five notes to the five wisdoms associated with the five Buddhas of the *maṇḍala*. The origin of the sounds of the five notes he situates in the five elements (earth, water, fire, wind, space). Posing the question, “What is the real, fundamental nature of the five modes and the five notes?” he concludes that “the fundamental real nature of the five modes and the five notes is the five elements and the five wisdoms, and is the Buddha-nature of the self (*jishin*) of ordinary people” (41b).

He goes on to state that “the five modes are precisely the vibrations of the five great elements” (42a). In this he is following Kūkai, who wrote in the *Shōji jissō gi* that “the five great elements have vibrations” (Hakeda 1972: 240). Kūkai expands on this rather terse statement by adding,

The five great elements of sentient beings and non-sentient beings are endowed with [the power of producing] vibrations and sounds, for no sounds are independent of the five great elements; these are the original substance, and the sounds or vibrations are their functions. Thus it is said in the verse, “The five great elements have vibrations.” (*loc. cit.*)

The origin of sound is located in the power of the five elements to produce sound or vibrations. The five elements also produce series of correspondences of fives. One set of correspondences links the five Buddhas, the five elements and five syllables. The five syllables correspond to the syllables associated with each Buddha.<sup>3</sup> Jakushō links these five syllables (*a, i, u, e, o*) to the five notes used in the pentatonic scale of *shōmyō* (*kyō, sho, kaku, chō, and u*). This association connects the scale structure of *shōmyō* to the primacy of the five elements, the efficacious power of the five syllables, and to the all-encompassing world of the Five Buddhas.

The correspondences between the five notes of the scale and the five Buddhas are given in one of the standard Shingon reference works, the *Mikkyō daijiten* (1970: 623).<sup>4</sup>

The five notes correspond to the five Buddhas of the Vajradhātu (*Kongō kai*) Maṇḍala. This correspondence to the Vajradhātu Maṇḍala is not exclusive of the Garbhakośa (*Taizō kai*) Maṇḍala, as the two *maṇḍala* are regarded as non-dual. The correspondences are, in ascending scalar order, *ichikotsu*—Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairocana), *hyōjō*—Muryōju (Amitāyus), *sojo*—Ashuku (Akṣobhya), *ōjiki*—Hōshō (Ratnasambhava), and *banjiki*—Fukūjōju (Amoghasiddhi).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These syllables correspond to the those of the deities in the *hō-mandara* (*dharma-maṇḍala*).

<sup>4</sup> Also see Ōyama (1989: 300).

<sup>5</sup> The varying correlations between Buddhas complicate this list and explain why it differs

Jakushō elaborates on the nature of these connections of five by quoting from Kūkai—“The sounds of all things separate into the five sounds. The substance/true form of these sounds is namely the five great elements” (42a). Again, referring to the teaching of Kūkai, he states that,

... the five modes and five notes are, in essence, the vocalized signifiers (*meisei*) of the five elements. However, the five modes and the five notes are namely the melody that is the original vessel of the five elements and the five wisdoms. It is merely that their names are different. (*loc. cit.*)

“Melody” (*onchō*) in this sense can be thought of as musical form. The five modes and the five notes provide a vessel, musical in formation, for the five sounds/vibrations of the five elements along with the five wisdoms.

Jakushō stresses the importance of *shōji* in this linkage of modes and notes with elements and wisdoms, writing,

The five sounds are the vocalized sound of the five elements and five wisdoms; even though each is equipped with infinite sound, there is not yet the ability to manifest the true characteristic of each in dependence upon its vocalized sound without the wonderful power of *shōji*. (43a)

*Shōji* is a difficult term to grasp, as it condenses, into a single word, a range of references that is exceedingly broad. Yamasaki gives some indication of this range.

*Shōji* means literally “voice letter,” referring not only to human speech and writing but [*sic*] to the meanings expressed in the elements, the senses, the various realms of being...—in fact all that can be seen, heard, sensed, and known. The “letter” points to the symbolic quality of the “voice” of all phenomena. This voice is the fundamental energy that takes form in all things that exist, which at the most profound level is understood to be the activity of Dainichi Nyorai’s three secrets.

(Yamasaki 1988: 62)

The conception of *shōji* expressed by Yamasaki follows the conception of sound and symbol articulated by Kūkai in *Shōji jissō gi*. Jakushō preserves the distinction, made by Kūkai in that work, between sound, word, and the meaning of the word. He states that in *shōmyō* the qualities of sound and letter accompany each other (44a). Yamasaki equates the sound of “voice” with the fundamental energy which is the activity of the *sanmitsu* of Dainichi

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from Harich-Schneider (1973: 327). For example, for *hyōjō* the *Mikkyō daijiten* lists Amida as the corresponding Buddha. Amida, in fact, corresponds in turn to Muryōju in the Vajradhātu Maṇḍala. Likewise, for *banjiki* the *Mikkyō daijiten* gives Shaka (i.e., Śākyamuni), who is Fukūjōju. See Snodgrass 1988 for more details on the correlations between these names.

Nyorai. Likewise, Jakushō locates the efficacy of *shōmyō* in ritual activity. He writes,

For the ascetic practitioners (*gyōjin*) who have performed ascetic ritual (*gyō*), when they have practised for a long time and achieved complete mastery, their melodies become the melodies of the Buddha world. It is in this manner that the *maṇḍala*'s praise melody becomes clear.

(44a8–12)

Kūkai wrote in the *Shōji jissō gi*, “The superior teachings [of the Tathagata] cannot arise in the absence of sound and word” (Hakeda 1972: 235). Jakushō, as noted, preserves the distinction between sound and word and elaborates upon the third step in the continuum. Sound and word become reality (in the sense of reality being Dainichi Nyorai) through their use by the practitioner in ritual. It is the performance of *shōmyō* in rituals which gives voice (a sonic presence) to the sound and it is through this process that these sounds manifest the world of Dainichi Nyorai. A parallel to the operation of the *sanmitsu* can be made in that, given the aim of Shingon ritual (articulated as *sokushin jōbutsu*), all steps of the continuum are required. Sound takes form as word and is articulated by the Shingon practitioner. Through long practice a meaning is continually disclosed as the world of the practitioner merges with that of Dainichi Nyorai. In the sense explicated by Paul Ricoeur, the word becomes an event and the event is interpreted through a process of continual disclosure.

Paul Ricoeur's work is of assistance, I believe, in examining how *shōmyō*, as a constituent of the *sanmitsu*, is used in Shingon ritual. Ricoeur's insights into the creation of meaning in metaphor and narrative suggest a cogent paradigm of how meaning is created and expressed in Shingon ritual. For Ricoeur, understanding (in the sense of understanding a metaphor or a narrative) involves a fusion of horizons accomplished through a “grasping together” of multiple and scattered events. The fusion is necessitated by a widening of the frame of reference. A metaphor shatters the literal sense of a word and demands reinterpretation at the level of the sentence or the work. The parameters from which understanding emerges therefore expand from the word to the sentence to the work.

In narrative it is the schematizing operation of emplotment that holds the various events of a story together in a temporal unity. It is the plot that unites and allows the diverse events of a story to be disclosed. Ricoeur writes, “The plot of a narrative ... ‘grasps together’ and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematizing the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole” (Ricoeur 1984: x). Emplotment is regarded, not in a static sense of a plot, but rather as a “putting-into-the-form-of-a-plot” (Ricoeur 1991: 3). The emphasis is on emplotment as a structuring operation that through its selection and arrangement of events makes a complete story.

The disclosure of completeness in Shingon ritual is aided by the emplotment supplied by the multifold correspondences of five discussed above. Emplotment holds together the various events of a story in a temporal unity. It integrates multiple and scattered events through a dynamic, structuring operation of selection and arrangement. Likewise, the series of fives hold together various, and seemingly scattered, components. They join, in meaningful combinations, the diversity of the five elements, syllables, Buddhas, wisdoms, notes, and modes of the *shōmyō* scale. In so doing, *shōmyō* is directly linked to Shingon formulations of the nature of reality.

It is precisely these meaningful combinations that reveal a formalized conception of the nature of reality. In one sense, everything is a manifestation of the activity of Dainichi Nyorai. However, the result is not a somewhat mushy “all things are one” but rather an arrival at a new perception that leads directly to the ontic plane. For Ricoeur, understanding (in the sense of understanding a narrative) is “grasping the operation that unifies into one whole and complete action the miscellany constituted by the circumstances, ends and means, initiatives and interactions, the reversals of fortune, and all the unintended consequences issuing from human action” (Ricoeur 1984: I x). Ricoeur’s theory of narrative situates understanding in a schematizing operation of re-made connections. “What is communicated, in the final analysis, is, beyond the sense of a work, the world it projects and that constitutes its horizon” (Ricoeur 1984: 77). Understanding, in Ricoeur’s conception, is the progressive enlargement of one’s horizons, the grasping together of miscellany into a coherent and meaningful whole.

It is my hypothesis that the many and complex constituent parts of Shingon ritual are “grasped together” by the practitioner and from this schematizing operation a new image of the identity of a character emerges. In Shingon ritual a new way of being in the world is proposed to the practitioner. The horizon of the practitioner is re-made and through a fusion of horizons with the deity of the ritual, new intelligible significations are experienced. It is in terms of this experience that one can speak not only of the meaning of the constituents (specifically in this case, of the ritual but also on a personal level, of meaning and a view of life—a disclosure of a world—for the individual.

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